



Posted on Fri, May. 02, 2008

## Congress still struggling to finish farm bill

By MARY CLARE JALONICK  
Associated Press Writer

Struggling to complete a farm bill that can survive a presidential veto, lawmakers have sent the White House a sixth extension of farm and nutrition programs.

Lawmakers had hoped to finish the legislation this week so a final version could be debated on the House and Senate floor next week. But following a meeting that lasted until early Friday morning, some key issues, including the size of payments to wealthy farmers, remained unresolved.

Bush, who's threatening to veto the legislation, has indicated he is not happy with the bill's progress, saying earlier this week that it's "bloated" with farmer subsidies.

The law originally expired in September. The extension gives Congress two more weeks to finish the legislation.

Negotiators reached a tentative agreement last week on how to pay for the bill, which would cost almost \$300 billion over five years, but are still resolving the policy, including how much would be paid to farmers in a time of record crop prices.

The bill's negotiators have tried to appease Bush in the last few days, agreeing on stricter limits for those government payments. That agreement would still allow growers who earn up to \$950,000 annually in farm income to receive payments, far from the \$200,000 annual income cap the Bush administration originally suggested.

Department of Agriculture Deputy Secretary Charles Conner said late Thursday night that the president wants to sign a farm bill that meets his criteria.

"If sent to him without meeting his criteria, he would be forced to veto the bill," Conner said. "We encourage the conferees to produce a bill which will gain his signature by reducing the cost and implementing real reform."

Also frustrated with the bill is Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain who says it's loaded with "pork-barrel projects."

"I do not support it. I would veto it," he told voters in Iowa, the heart of farm country where the government subsidies are widely popular. "I would do that because I believe that the subsidies are unnecessary."

Farm-state lawmakers have said they don't have the votes for more drastic cutbacks, mostly due to opposition from Southerners who represent cotton and rice farms, which are more expensive to run.

Georgia Sen. Saxby Chambliss, the Senate Agriculture Committee's top Republican, met Thursday with Bush to urge him to support the legislation. A spokeswoman said the meeting gave Chambliss "the opportunity to outline significant reforms" in the negotiators' current proposal.

White House spokesman Scott Stanzel said the meeting was private and would not detail Bush's reaction. He said the president is expected to sign the two-week extension.

Despite the earlier agreement, North Dakota Sen. Kent Conrad said the issue of the size of government subsidies was not yet settled. He said the cuts already made would constitute considerable cutbacks from current law, which allows all farmers who make up to \$2.5 million to collect payments.

"We are trying to be responsive to the president's concerns," Conrad said.

Farm groups are not the only interests lobbying for the bill. Anti-hunger organizations are also pushing Congress to finish the legislation, as around two-thirds of the bill's cost would pay for food stamps and other nutrition programs. The legislation includes a more than \$10 billion boost for nutrition.

Rising food costs have added to that urgency.

"I cannot overemphasize how important it is for our elected officials in Washington, including President Bush, to complete their work on the farm bill and bring hope to the 25 million Americans our network serves," said Vicki Escarra, president of America's Second Harvest - The Nation's Food Bank Network.

Negotiators ended the meeting deadlocked and undecided over a controversial House proposal that would block some states' privatization of the food stamp program. A privatization effort in Indiana has been closely watched after a similar venture failed in Texas.

---

© 2008 Kentucky.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kentucky.com>